**Marriage Migration, Migrant Precarity, and Social Reproduction in Asia:**

**An Overview**

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**Abstract:** This paper takes as its starting point the multidirectionality and multi-sitedness of change triggered by migration, especially in relation to gender and migrant precarity. More specifically, it interrogates four strands of the gendered migration debate related to marriage migration: various forms of precarity faced by migrant women and their implications in socio-economic and legal terms; changes to family patterns and social reproduction connected to marriage migration; social policies in origin and destination countries and their relevance to women’s unpaid care work duties; and the productive and reproductive functions involved in the creation of a precarity that leads to, and results, from marriage migration. It points to remaining gaps in knowledge and offers ideas for future lines of inquiry into marriage migration in general and in the context of Asia specifically.

Keywords: marriage migration\_1, migrant precarity\_2, social reproduction\_3, gendered migration\_4, Asia\_5

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**Introduction**

For some time, policy makers ignored the possibility of intra-Asian migration leading to significant long-term social, cultural, and political change.[[1]](#footnote-1) They were far more interested in two particular types of labor migration (regulated legal migration occurring on a strictly temporary and typically employer-tied basis and irregular, unauthorized migration, especially in relation to counter-trafficking measures) and consequently did not seriously consider the main legal form of migration, temporary contract migration. This latter type was originally considered a stop-gap measure to alleviate short-term problems of over- and undersupply of workers in the context of the broad push and pull dynamics between resource richer and poorer countries around the world, with an aging and, on average, well-educated population in destination countries and a younger demographic profile under conditions of unemployed or underemployment in source countries. In recent years, the migration of workers has morphed into a structural and long-term feature of Asian economies, partly in response to enhanced neoliberal economic practices and concomitant macro-economic development policies. The permanence of temporary migration has, however, not been addressed sufficiently, and a debate on pathways to permanent immigration is largely absent in the literature.

Temporary contract migration in the specific context of intra-Asian flows has been a mainstay in the literature on migration development. The analytical debate on the link between migration and development in Asia is dominated by macro-economic perspectives that treat labor migration as a pathway out of poverty, especially in policymaker discourse. This narrow outlook reflects a unidirectional understanding of change; namely, that migrants flow from resource-poor countries to resource-rich ones. In this narrative, transnational linkages are typically confined to the flow of remittances from, and the acquisition of skills in, the migrant receiving countries back to migrants’ countries of origin. This limited perspective does not situate development within the empirical reality of the multi-directionality of transnational flows that affect places, spaces, and people in countries of origin *and* destination, simultaneously and over time (e.g. in relation to life course stages and a longitudinal perspective). [[2]](#footnote-2) It has also resulted in a lack of attention paid to other forms of migration beyond the classic temporary labor migration model, including marriage migration, the focus of this thematic issue.

This paper outlines directions towards a fresh approach to both the migration-development nexus debate and marriage migration by linking the two. Our general approach is premised on a definition of development that includes broader social transformation,[[3]](#footnote-3) thereby capturing the multidirectionality and multi-sitedness of change triggered by migration. There is now greater appreciation of both origin and destination countries as subject to development, but there is relatively little analysis of what gendered migration signifies in terms of the type of development involved or the consequences of a spatial and temporal matrix of fluid movement. Moreover, migrants are exposed to multi-layered forms of precarity in and beyond labor markets throughout the entire migration cycle.[[4]](#footnote-4) By leaving gender out or applying gender primarily (if not exclusively) to domestic worker migration (the dominant form of legal migration for women in Asian countries), salient issues of social reproduction are necessarily side-lined.

When we consider gendered migration, social reproduction, and precarity together, an obvious choice of study is marriage migration. It is neither tied to a temporary contract nor solely of the productive kind, and is highly gendered.[[5]](#footnote-5) Many marriage migrants engage in both unpaid and paid reproductive labor, often simultaneously. In this regard, a discussion of development that includes marriage migration should be considered part of the ongoing debate on care and development and included within the rubric of *social* development.[[6]](#footnote-6) In addition, not only is marriage an important aspect of women’s migration,[[7]](#footnote-7) marriage migration epitomizes a crucial aspect of societal transformation,[[8]](#footnote-8) as forms of gender and cross-generational relations change within nuclear and across extended families (i.e., transnationally split) leading to complexities in the delivery of care.

**Marriage Migration and the Migration-Development Nexus Debate**

Three strands of the gendered migration debate allow us to link marriage migration to the migration-development nexus debate: first, migrant women (including marriage migrants) face new forms of precarity beyond the workplace, the dominant focus of mainstream scholarly debate, with implications for transnational and multidirectional development; second, changing family patterns and dynamics connected to marriage migration are set within the transnational sphere and form a crucial aspect of migrant precarity, with conceptual and operational implications; and third, women and marriage migrants are often relegated to the realm of care and reproductive labor in paid and unpaid forms, with implications for social policy regimes. Reproductive labor refers to labor that creates or aids in creating labor power. It includes biological reproduction, as well as nurturing individuals throughout their life cycles through education, child rearing, and nursing. It also includes the social reproduction of units deemed essential to the maintenance of society, such as family life and labor associated with families such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry work, as well as kinship ties. In this sense, it includes not only the biological (re-) production of citizens but also the ways society regenerates itself.

A discussion of development in the context of these three interrelated strands cannot be divorced from a discussion of contemporary forms of neoliberal economic globalization, of specific forms of migration management, or of the effects on “the social” (i.e., family life and care). An analysis of marriage migration often reveals a receiving state’s attempt to solve a *national* reproductive crisis, generated by demographic shifts and economic downturns, via *transnational* means (albeit with no consideration of the broader implications) by utilizing migrant women to provide paid and unpaid forms of reproductive work.[[9]](#footnote-9) Meanwhile, the sending state solves its socio-economic problems by exporting (female) labor, thereby outsourcing income generation necessary for the financing of care at home (mostly via remittances). As a result, care becomes subject to complex transnational arrangements of a multidirectional and multi-sited nature. Such arrangements, in turn, are linked with and contribute to the deepening of migrants’ precarious status in social and legal terms since such arrangements are often a response to insufficient institutional and regulatory frameworks or other support mechanisms provided by the state.

Our aim in this introductory paper is to provide new directions for the reframing and re- conceptualizing of marriage migration as part of the migration-development nexus debate by interrogating development as it relates to marriage migration and vice versa. We examine how marriage migration informs current understandings of development and what the use of a development lens contributes to an analysis of marriage migration. The paper is not based on primary empirical data or a specific case study; rather, by linking gendered forms of migration with development through the specific lens of marriage migration, it provides an overview of the role of certain forms of migration within the reconfiguration of economies in sending and receiving societies, looking closely at the political economy of crisis management from the perspective of social reproduction and care, as well as personal and collective (that is, families and communities) coping strategies. The papers that follow[[10]](#footnote-10) discuss some of these aspects in more depth, in conceptual as well as empirical terms. Other angles of inquiry are left for future research, inspired, we hope, by our discussion.

Building on the argument of Piper and Roces[[11]](#footnote-11) against the separation of marriage migrants and labor migrants by highlighting important intersections between the two, the following sections set the scene for this thematic collection by demonstrating a link between marriage migrants and the unpaid and underpaid labor of women, with special attention on the patriarchal family as the locus of the reproduction of labor power, characterized under neoliberalism by the inadequacy of public service provisioning, which, in turn, results in a preponderance of women working in precarious sectors such as care work or housework. Marriage migrants are of special interest, as they experience precarity not only in economic and labor terms but also in a social and legal sense. In fact, marriage migration is a vector of multiple forms of precarity and stages of precarity that begin in the country of origin before migration.

**Marriage Migration, Development and Precarity**

Amongst the various critiques of the dominant narrative on the link between migration and development,[[12]](#footnote-12) a key concern is that certain types of migrants and certain forms of migration have been left out of the narrative altogether.[[13]](#footnote-13) These include gendered forms of migration[[14]](#footnote-14) as well as marriage migration.[[15]](#footnote-15) Generally speaking, researchers have paid critical attention to the economic costs and benefits of migration but neglected the social aspects.[[16]](#footnote-16) Empirical and methodological shortcomings in policy-driven literature on the migration-development nexus are also evident, with a lamentable lack of intergenerational and longitudinal perspectives, as well as detailed ethnographic accounts that would complement macro-level, more structurally driven analyses.[[17]](#footnote-17) Probing marriage migration in the Asian context offers an important entry point into interrogating and reinvigorating the mainstream migration-development nexus debate.

Simply stated, marriage migration has been excluded from the migration-development nexus debate because it is typically not considered labor or work related; hence, it is not seen as a so-called productive type of migration leading to skill development or the accumulation of assets that can be invested in the country or community of origin upon return. Nonetheless, a case for the inclusion of marriage migration within labor migration has been made by some scholars, leading to the reconceptualization of labor migration from the vantage point of gendered critiques of international migration.[[18]](#footnote-18) Such critiques are based on the argument and supporting empirical evidence that international marriage is one of the rare chances for less-educated women to migrate legally and gain access to employment abroad with prospects for permanent residency. This line of inquiry considers structural factors and women’s agency as they navigate a limited range of choices.

Extending the migration-development nexus debate to include marriage migration is important for three reasons. First, such an extension exposes the myth of the temporariness of international migration in Asia, as marriage migration constitutes a long-term if not permanent form of migration. Second, with the majority of foreign spouses being women from so-called developing countries in Southeast and Northeast Asia,[[19]](#footnote-19) this migration is inseparable from classic development concerns, such as poverty, welfare, and social security. Like other labor migrants, marriage migrants are very much involved in sending remittances to their birth families and prefer to do so via their own income generating activities. Yet marriage migrants’ outmigration raise important issues beyond such classic concerns, for example, social reproduction and care in a transnational context. In this sense, marriage migration brings to the fore issues that the mainstream debate on development side lines or neglects altogether, despite their relevance. Third, many marriage migrants engage in non-industrial forms of labor that deviate from the trajectories of mainstream development studies; in fact, various precarious forms of labor are specific to women workers. Domestic and care work, some service and agricultural work, and other forms of non-regular labor reflect the general trend of feminised migration.[[20]](#footnote-20) Such gendered forms of precarious labor signify a specific pathway or feature of development that deserves teasing out.

**Precarity and Gendered Migration**

In the existing literature, the concept of precarity has been applied to changing work conditions for both migrant and non-migrant workers. As non-citizens, migrant workers are regarded as a precarious group in relation to their work environment in the sense that they are heavily represented in low paid sectors, often performing non-standardized work. [[21]](#footnote-21) They are also viewed as insecure, especially when on temporary visas. This impacts their ability to seek recourse when they experience violations of their labor rights or other forms of abuse. Migrant status has, thus, been identified as an important marker for precarity in certain sectors of the labor market and in sub-standard, unregulated forms of work. [[22]](#footnote-22) Yet how ethnicity, class, and gender intersect to shape individual experiences and personal forms of precarity and what this means in terms of development remain largely unaddressed in the existing literature.

Under the unequal modalities of globalization, certain classes of women who work outside of their countries of citizenship have limited legal opportunities beyond the few that push them into care and domestic work related jobs due to the high demand for a (gendered) workforce. [[23]](#footnote-23) For some time, feminist scholars have attempted to de-essentialize, explain, and deconstruct gender roles in the global economy.[[24]](#footnote-24) They have shown that gender issues are present in the entire migration process, as migrants leave and enter gendered labor markets and gendered social structures.[[25]](#footnote-25) Gender plays a decisive role in the recruitment process, being the first step towards controlling access to specific labor markets or the channelling of migrants into certain jobs that they would otherwise not chose if a greater range of choices were available. Consequently, gender frequently creates contradictory patterns that both mobilize women’s migration as well as discipline and control them into accepting specific conditions.[[26]](#footnote-26) While families in migrant-sending countries such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia prefer men to migrate overseas,[[27]](#footnote-27) studies confirm that women in these countries migrate in equal or even higher numbers. They do so for a variety of reasons, including cheaper recruitment fees for women and greater demand for women in feminized sectors such as domestic and care work.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Since the macro level forces that drive migration are in part the product of unequal material development between the origin and destination countries, the migration-development nexus debate benefits from being linked to precarity, especially from a gender perspective. By introducing the concept of precarity into the migration and development discussion, issues of inequality and injustice can be brought to the fore. By highlighting marriage migrants’ unequal position within the international division of labor and the global crisis of care[[29]](#footnote-29) against the backdrop of a constraining regulatory framework, we can broaden the understanding of precarity not only beyond the sphere of work but also in spatial terms – that is, by including the country of origin (thus, pre-migration or return) perspective.

The inclusion of the concept of precarity in discussions on links between migration and development, especially when approached from a gender perspective, redirects attention to the political interests underpinning the migration-development nexus debate. [[30]](#footnote-30) Because many aspects of this debate are tied to the “management of migration” discourse and the concomitant regulatory framework proposed and increasingly implemented around the world (albeit to differing degrees), migration is generally treated as a matter of controlling population movements and, thus, controlling access to employment opportunities and channelling workers into certain labor market sectors often characterized by less favourable conditions. Moreover, from the country of origin perspective, especially in Asia where underemployment and unemployment in the absence of sufficient social safety networks is rampant, the management of migration is also about the management of poverty.

This management discourse is premised on the “managed temporary labour migration” paradigm as a model for development, especially in labor-exporting countries. [[31]](#footnote-31) Because a gender perspective is missing from this discourse, gender inequality in terms of access to and gains from migration is rarely considered. One of the outcomes of this omission is that marriage migration is left out of the equation. We suggest two reasons for this omission: first, marriage migration is not part of temporary migration schemes meant to open up employment and skill training opportunities for certain periods of time, at the end of which migrants are to return to their countries of origin to assist with the development of their home communities; and second, marriage migration is not conventionally seen as part of labor migration.

In fact, the managed temporary migration paradigm is one-sidedly and uncritically framed as a “triple win” with temporary migration providing a “win, win, win” solution for both the countries of origin and destination as well as the migrants themselves. This “triple win” mantra is couched in the bureaucratically neutral language of “good practices” and technicalities typical of bilateral labor agreements and memoranda of understanding between states. Individual migrants have been framed in this narrative not as victims of unequal development but as “agents of development.” What this claim obscures is the fact that agency is derived from the neoliberal understanding of self-help in the context of the withering away or stagnating of public services provided by the state. Missing is a critical view of the position of international migration within a system of global inequality exacerbated by a neoliberal economic policy framework. Introducing the concept of precarity into the debate allows us to highlight the problematic (and highly political) nature of the managed migration paradigm.

Finally, by introducing marriage migration into this paradigm, we open up the debate to the important issues of social reproduction and care. Both national and local governments in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have devised policies to assist single male citizens to meet women from Southeast Asia and China to address demographic problems.[[32]](#footnote-32) Yet these policies are restricted in Japan and South Korea because of concerns about ethnic composition or homogeneity.[[33]](#footnote-33) Meanwhile, Taiwan and Hong Kong authorities desire to maintain “population quality” by creating barriers to a projected inflow of brides from mainland China.[[34]](#footnote-34) From this perspective, there is a clear element of deliberate management.

**Managing Migration in Times of Crises**

With the introduction of precarity into our analytical framework, we can reframe the debate not as a “triple win” but as a crisis issue – or rather, as multiple forms of crises underpinning the multi-directionality of precarious migratory movements and transnational strategies used to supply and receive care through paid and unpaid reproductive labor.[[35]](#footnote-35) Our framework pays attention to migration triggered, motivated, and justified by the socio-economic and political crises from all three actors’ viewpoints – the country of origin, the country of destination, and those of individual migrants.

Attempts to manage migration in practice and the discursive frame of migration management are not neutral but embedded in inequality and reflect political (often elite) interests. So far, the politics of the management of migration have only been discussed by scholars in relation to migration schemes designed to be temporary,[[36]](#footnote-36) not in relation to supposedly permanent migration such as marriage migration or in relation to transitioning from one status to another. This is problematic, as there is ample evidence from the lived experience of marriage migrants that migration is fluid, involving both relocation and multi-directionality, as the contributions to this thematic issue make abundantly clear. Moreover, marriage migrants retain a sense of temporality based on their continued precarious state of being and living, which has, amongst other factors, to do with the transnational nature of their care responsibilities and strategies. More specifically, their reproductive and care strategies as well as the fulfilment of their own care needs center on their perceived and real responsibilities to both their natal family and their newly formed family. This dual focus is partly explained by the absence of family unification policies and partly by the inaccessibility of public welfare arrangements and the unaffordability of privatized services in the countries of destination and origin.

Precarity is already a well-known issue of the pre-migration phase; it helps push migrants out to seek work and a life overseas. In this sense, precarity is representative of existing economic realities, and is not a new moment in capitalist relations. Yet until recently, the language of precarity has been conspicuously absent from much of the literature on the Global South.[[37]](#footnote-37) This is surprising because migration cannot be seen as a linear path into precarity or a means by which migrants become precarious. Rather, foreign employment should be understood as precarious work undertaken to mitigate existing conditions of precarity at home.[[38]](#footnote-38) What emerges from this is a view of precarity as a transnational experience that is spatially reconfigured through migration but, nonetheless, represents a constant experience for migrant workers torn between social relations with their natal families and communities and those established in the country of destination.

By introducing precarity into the analysis of the link between marriage migration and the migration-development nexus, we go beyond classic development concerns of poverty alleviation, as international migrants are not necessarily the poorest of the poor or characterized by low levels of education.[[39]](#footnote-39) Nor are their reasons for migrating necessarily or even predominantly economic.[[40]](#footnote-40) Like male migration, female migration is motivated by a complex web of social relations. In this sense, precarity takes on multifaceted meanings in cultural, social, and economic terms and is reflective of a multi-layered state of crisis.

The 2008 economic crisis had global ramifications. For their part, labor migrants have had to contend with increasingly precarious employment conditions, including reduced hours, lower wages, unpaid contracts, and employer bankruptcies. Incidences of retrenchment have increased, with factory closures throughout in the Global South.[[41]](#footnote-41) As Spitzer and Piper argue, however, the context of labor migration in Asia reflects a multiplicity of long-standing social, economic, and political crises.[[42]](#footnote-42) Any response to this most recent crisis cannot be divorced from the ongoing series of political and economic crises workers have faced at home and abroad for decades. In the Philippines, for example, decades of neoliberal measures derived from structural adjustment policies have led to continuing employment instability, compelling workers to shift in and out of informal sector employment locally and into contract employment overseas. Given the rising demand in the global care economy for health and domestic workers, the Philippines has become the epitome of the feminization of migration in Asia, followed by Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Myanmar.[[43]](#footnote-43) In other words, the precarity of Asian migrant workers in the current economy is not a new situation but an ongoing one, rooted in the exigencies of neoliberal globalization and globally networked capitalism.

**Precarity, Social Reproduction and Crisis of Care**

Marriage migrants are part and parcel of this phenomenon of multiple crises. Unlike many temporary contract migrants who enter countries of destination as workers but are legally barred from forming new families (in Singapore and Malaysia, for instance), marriage migrants enter as spouses and form new families.[[44]](#footnote-44) Although upon entering motherhood, they can acquire more rights, as for example is the case in South Korea, they are still exposed to other forms of vulnerability. By including precarity in the analysis of marriage migration, we suggest reproduction and care are characterized by an element of crisis.

Reproductive labor has been an important dimension of women’s economic and human development.[[45]](#footnote-45) It has shaped women’s access to and treatment in the labor market and the education sector and has increasingly become a factor in the measure of the equality of free time.[[46]](#footnote-46) More importantly for our purposes, reproductive labor is at the center of scholarly work on gender and migration, with care considered an important dimension of reproductive labor, especially from a social policy point of view.[[47]](#footnote-47) A contentious aspect of reproductive labor in relation to women’s achievement of their development potential is its unpaid nature. Women are assumed to be natural providers of unpaid work such as home-making, child rearing, and looking after the sick and the elderly. This has obvious implications for their participation in formal labor markets and their achievement of their full potential. Merely distinguishing between paid and unpaid work, however, does not fully recognize women’s contribution to development, a claim supported by the ethnographic record in the global care chain literature.[[48]](#footnote-48) When reproductive labor crosses borders and is outsourced to migrant women, women from the resource richer parts of the world can achieve their social and economic aspirations. Yet migrant women’s monetary or social contributions to development are seldom acknowledged.[[49]](#footnote-49)

In marriage migrant destination countries in East Asia, increasing numbers of domestic women are gaining access to more and better education and postponing or refusing marriage altogether, leaving more men unmarried. This shift has had extensive repercussions, as domestic men often have caring responsibilities for their parents as the first born son or as male breadwinners (i.e. in an economic not intimate emotional sense).[[50]](#footnote-50) Southeast Asian countries of origin, meanwhile, have fledgling social welfare and safety nets and a much younger, often underemployed or unemployed population. Moreover, the less-educated or less skilled have little recourse to legal migration channels, except for strictly temporary migration (e.g. as domestic workers). In this context, women can and do use marriage migration as a way out, giving them at least a glimmer of hope of greater security and the opportunity to support their birth families. In turn, however, their out-migration can result in social reproductive challenges for the communities left behind, as Belanger demonstrates (this issue) in Vietnam, where local men are left without marriage partners due to the fairly large numbers of Vietnamese women migrating internationally for marriage.

At face value, marriage migration appears to be a secure way of achieving a less precarious life legally, socially, and economically, but the men who marry such women are often characterized by socio-economic qualities deemed undesirable by local women in the destination countries. For example, they may be working class, disabled, or have other ailments or problems such as gambling or drinking. In this sense, security has to be qualified. Its achievement via international marriage can be a myth, as is the hope of becoming an income-earning migrant in a richer country.

Some researchers on reproductive and care labor argue that capitalism and globalization have had a disproportionate effect on women, especially those performing “emotional labour.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Women providing reproductive labor of this nature engage in global processes of exchanging, buying, selling, objectifying, and consuming commodified forms of intimacy. Constable (2009) borrows the latter notion from Marx, defining commodification as a “process of assigning market value to goods or services that previously existed outside of the market.”[[52]](#footnote-52) As global care chain scholars points out, this commodification process has had a profound effect on women from the Global South, notably in their treatment as disposable and objectified labor.[[53]](#footnote-53) Although this strand of feminist critique usefully exposes market structures and mechanisms that define and constrain the role of women, it neglects the role of the state in condoning, developing, and reinforcing the globalised private exchange of care services.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Others argue the commodification of affect has created particularized sites of reproductive deficit, with the state devising class-, gender-, and ethnicity-specific responses. This strand of feminist critique actively engages with state discourses. For example, Pei-Chia Lan identifies Foucauldian-style control of sexuality and the body in state policies on gender and migration.[[55]](#footnote-55) She explores what she labels the “care deficit” and “bride deficit” in her study of the reproductive labor provided by migrant domestic workers and marriage migrants in Taiwan. While the care deficit is, in part, triggered by middle class women pursuing tertiary education, professional careers, and modern life-styles, she attributes the bride deficit is to the rising number of single women in Taiwan. Compared to the past, significantly more Taiwanese women of marriageable age are now pursuing university degrees, participating in the labor market, building careers, and enjoying financial independence. They combine a concern for the high costs of child rearing with a desire for an equal partnership. These factors are a bane for Taiwanese men who are already challenged in their search for a partner, given Taiwan’s skewed gender ratio. Consequently, working class men have been drawn to the reproductive labor offered by marriage migrants, leading some scholars to suggest marriage migration is a working class response to the reproductive crisis in Taiwan and Singapore.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Similarly, middle class South Korean couples look for care workers to supplement inadequate social support for working mothers, daughters, and in-laws.[[57]](#footnote-57) In the state’s view, the declining domestic birth-rate is the driving force for marriage migrants. This has been coupled with the state’s equating pregnancy and the production of future entrants into the national labor market with patriotism. Indeed, the promise of marriage migrants’ biological and social reproduction is of tantamount value from the state’s perspective. Yet migrants’ desire to engage in paid employment has received little attention, even though they are under pressure to support their natal families as well as contribute to their newly-formed ones.

**Precarious Worker, Precarious Carer**

Ito Peng provides a useful overview of the shaping of East Asia’s welfare state over time.[[58]](#footnote-58) As she notes, the liberalization of labor markets in this sub-region has had detrimental effects on women’s employment. However, marriage migration in Asia cannot be separated from the neoliberalization of government and globalised economic links affecting both migrant origin and migrant destination countries. Global care chain theories problematize care migration because it signifies a failure to address the care gap in destination and origin countries in terms of public service provisioning, using the extraction of care labor from the origin countries as a solution, typically at the expense of migrants’ social needs.

Welfare regimes in Asia are highly dependent on the family.[[59]](#footnote-59) Familial support from marriage migrants’ birth families, however, is limited because of the lack of family reunification options and restrictive immigration policies in destination countries. In addition, migrant women are tasked with remitting money to their birth families; this is especially onerous, given their heavy reliance on the income and support network provided by their husbands, not to mention the difficulties they encounter finding paid work. When they do find work, they may struggle to make ends meet on low wages. Migrant women, like other working class women, typically engage in highly precarious forms of employment that do not provide sufficient social benefits or adequate levels of income. A lack of social services, adequate living income, and maternal provisions at work, together with a lack of family support, create a challenge for women to avoid poverty, let alone maintain a family-work balance. For divorced, widowed, or separated marriage migrants, the lack of care support from fathers or husbands and the care burden exacerbated by poverty introduces them to even greater levels of precarity.

**Multi-Layered and Multi-Sited Forms of Marriage Migrants’ Precarity: Implications for Development**

Migrant women are exposed to a combination of legal, social, and institutional precarity.[[60]](#footnote-60) In this sense, the concept of precarity extends beyond the specificity of migration or migrant workers; it captures a new era in contemporary capitalist economies marked by significant changes in the structure of labour markets and the organisation of work, with a concomitant cast of new social actors, the ‘precariat’.[[61]](#footnote-61) Over the last 25 years, changes in labour markets and working conditions have been manifested in a retreat from standard forms of employment, the erosion of workers’ employment rights, industrial protections and remuneration levels, and a rise in employment insecurity.[[62]](#footnote-62) Amongst other countries globally, countries in East Asia, such as Japan and South Korea, main destination countries of marriage migrants from Southeast Asia, have been affected. The spreading and deepening of neoliberal policies in East Asia partially explain the rise in foreign labour working in low-wage jobs.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Precarious employment is, thus, generally associated with the deregulation of labour markets; contractual arrangements that infuse the work experience with insecurity and uncertainty are increasingly evident in contingent forms of work, flexible and non-standard employment, atypical and temporary work.[[64]](#footnote-64) Some critics advocate a broader framing that reaches beyond the immediacy of the employer-employee contractual relations. They prefer to map precarity by measuring income insecurity, working time insecurity, representational insecurity and social benefits and entitlements, and the broader social context of the employment experience.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Migrant workers are particularly susceptible to being locked into categories of work characterized by these features.[[66]](#footnote-66) The situation is compounded for migrant women. For one thing, many are relegated to low-wage and insecure forms of work at the intersection of productive and reproductive labor performed in the private and public sphere. For another, they may lack citizenship, have a precarious visa status, and experience other vulnerabilities because of ethnicity and their linguistic and social differences.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Unfortunately, employment-related aspects of marriage migration and marriage migrants’ recognition as workers remain understudied. Whilst marriage migrants have a substantial presence amongst permanent residents in East Asia where ethnic homogeneity was popularly assumed until recently, migration scholarship in Asia has not paid sufficient attention to the nature of work carried out or to the challenges faced by these presumably new members of society. In terms of personal identity, ethnic, gender, and class markers create a unique form of precarity to which working class men and women in destination societies may not be subjected, but few studies have considered marriage migrants’ (or other female permanent migrants’) employment status from an industrial relations point of view, including such issues as social benefit provisions, discrimination prevention, or social policies on pensions, employment and health insurance, and industrial protection. At the same time, the country of origin perspective merits increased scholarly attention, as marriage migrants who leave a precarious situation (such as divorce)[[68]](#footnote-68) often return to their country of birth.

In a discussion of the establishment of standard employment relations in Fordism and the Keynesian welfare state, Vosko (2010) argues this understanding did not govern employment relations and practices across the entire spectrum of the labor market. Nevertheless, insofar as it defined the terms of employment in some industries and occupations, it gave rise to a set of norms and practices that became embedded in those industries, as for example, the “male breadwinner model” and its counterpart, the “gender contract.”[[69]](#footnote-69) This complementarity is equally evident in how citizenship demarcates access to the benefits afforded by standard employment relations.[[70]](#footnote-70) As many have noted, institutionalized discrimination and the insecurity associated with the absence of enduring resident or citizenship rights, along with the consequences of blocked access to welfare entitlements, compound the labor market disadvantages that define and shape the migrant employment experience.[[71]](#footnote-71)

Marriage adds yet another dimension to legal precarity. For example, destination country governments have laws and policies in place to ensure the “authenticity” of cross-border marriages. Some governments require marriage migrants to remain married for a certain length of time before they qualify for a resident permit in their own right. These periods vary from two to ten years, depending on the country. Others have additional requirements for permanent legal residence, such as income, assets, minimal education levels, and careers. In East Asia, spousal visas are often tied to husbands or biracial children.[[72]](#footnote-72) Such visas are sometimes subject to indefinite renewal with no specified time limit.[[73]](#footnote-73) Legal and bureaucratic procedures are often arduous and complicated, preventing migrants from having a correct understanding of vital details and procedures, and forcing them to be dependent on their husbands or in-laws. Feminists argue such requirements can be a trap for women locked into marriages marred by domestic violence or other forms of abuse. Legal precarity is exacerbated in the event of divorce, which is significant among transnational marriages in Japan and South Korea[[74]](#footnote-74) This situation suggests the issue of marriage migrants’ return to their countries of origin after divorce and re-integration into their home communities or new communities requires detailed scholarly and policy attention.

While migrating for work has been presented as a panacea for the material insecurity pervading the Global South, Southeast Asian women who seek to escape economic and social insecurity confront an entirely different set of insecurities. Marriage migrants who join the transnational workforce enter a world that promises relief but is built on multiple insecurities and leaves them susceptible to a range of widely documented abuses.

**Ramifications for Gender and Cross-Generational Relations and the Delivery of Care**

The concept of precarity captures a combination of financial, social, and legal insecurity. Most conceptualizations are derived from Western contexts or take the perspective of receiving countries (i.e. post-migration). Yet the concept equally applies to migrants’ pre-migration experiences. It has additional utility when combined with a gendered perspective, specifically in the area of reproduction and the care economy.

Care has emerged as a transnational phenomenon in the context of gendered migration and restrictive migration policies.[[75]](#footnote-75) “Family care” is an increasingly complex issue in a transnational setting. On the one hand, origin countries generally lack support programs to help family members cope with the absence of migrants and the gap in (unpaid) reproductive labor their absence creates, especially when the migrant is a woman. On the other hand, working class migrant women who marry men abroad find little support to raise their own children, a situation exacerbated by separation or divorce from their citizen-spouse.

Migrant women leave and enter precarious situations in both a temporal and a spatial sense. Limited family unification policies are available in Asian destination countries. Therefore, aging parents cannot join their daughter-migrant, complicating her care responsibilities towards both her birth and newly formed families. To care for the former from a distance, the migratory daughter may need to send remittances. But if she accepts paid work, this leaves care gaps in her new family, which may include elderly parents-in-law as well as children. This means marriage migrants are often caught in a multi-layered web of care deficits at both ends of the migratory spectrum. In short, their caring practices are related to their socioeconomic precarity.

The lived reality of marriage migrants suggests ongoing cross-border relations. Scholars of transnationalism mostly consider transnational families in the context of broader conceptual issues such as global care chains, the global division of labor, or the commodification of intimacy and affect.[[76]](#footnote-76) But on a real life level, as the preceding discussion makes clear, a transnational family can include non-migrating family members who remain in the country of origin and new family members in the country of destination, with both families requiring the migrant’s attention.[[77]](#footnote-77)

In sum, our approach complements the global care chain literature by highlighting the role of state legislation and policy-making in areas of social reproduction and migration (or the lack thereof). Scholars of marriage migration in Asia have noted that certain Asian governments (particularly in East Asia) may seek to attract foreign women to solve demographic problems. But by going beyond this to treat marriage migration as a vector for social change, we are able to study interconnected political and social changes in origin and destination countries. [[78]](#footnote-78) For example, market liberalization in communist countries such as Vietnam and China has led to reduced public support for women’s reproductive labor[[79]](#footnote-79) whilst the creation of welfare regimes in East Asia has been concurrent with neoliberal development, particularly after the 1997 Asian financial crisis in Taiwan and South Korea.[[80]](#footnote-80) By taking a transnational perspective, marriage migration researchers can link social change at both ends of the migration trajectory. Common to the experiences of women in both origin and destination countries is an imbalance of economic and social development from a gender point of view. In the developed economies of East Asia, social policies implemented in a neoliberal environment have been directed at market restructuring and flexible labour formation, creating contradictions and “bad deals” for women.[[81]](#footnote-81) Women are pressured to serve dual roles—to participate in the labor market and carry out unpaid reproductive labor at home—without adequate social support. Against this backdrop, we stress the need for a transnational perspective on and a coordinated approach towards marriage migration and its symbolic and evocative positioning.

**Summing Up: New Lines of Inquiry**

We have contextualized development within the broader notion of social transformation to capture the multidirectionality of change triggered by migration. To this end, we include a type of migrant not usually deemed relevant to the migration-development nexus debate: the marriage migrant. Adding the perspective of gender to our analysis, we have asked what marriage migration signifies in terms of the direction and type of development in the countries of origin *and* destination. By introducing precarity into our analytical framework, we suggest broader questions about development cannot be divorced from a discussion of capitalism and its embeddedness in contemporary forms of neoliberal economic globalization and an emphasis on privatization, commercialization, efficiency, and competition. Through the case of marriage migration reproduction and care in times of spreading neoliberalism, we have introduced the element of “crisis” to counterbalance the otherwise overtly positive framing of the migration-development nexus as a “win, win, win” outcome for sending states, receiving states, and migrants themselves.

The main reason why marriage migration is often excluded from studies of the migration-development nexus is because of a particular understanding of development politics that champions temporary contract migration as a way for migrants to contribute to the development of their home countries and communities. Marriage migration has been commonly omitted from the debate, mostly because it is not generally associated with employment and income. However, as more recent studies show, marriage migrants from resource poorer countries usually engage in care and reproductive labor in a transnational context, manifested primarily but not solely through remittances. Thus, paid work is vital for them. The types of jobs available are highly precarious, however, as is their socio-legal status. If marriage does not work out, these women are likely to fail in two corresponding ways: they will not obtain secure residential status abroad with the right to engage in paid employment, and they will not have a steady source of income to contribute to their natal families or new families.[[82]](#footnote-82)

We argue that gendered forms of precarity are ubiquitous in the lives of migrant women, both in Asia and elsewhere, with implications for economic and social development. Future research should probe more deeply into how family structures, social reproduction, and social transformation are connected to marriage migration and consider the transnational challenges posed to women’s migration to preserving, changing, or creating social service regimes in Asia, in both destination and origin countries.

Marriage migration can be incorporated into the migration-development nexus discussion by engaging with migration policies and the contemporary discourse of international migration management, as well as by identifying gaps between policies and policy discourses at international, national, (both origin and destination countries) and local levels. The migration and development literature does not yet recognize marriage migration as a significant migratory trajectory for economic and social development purposes. Therefore, researchers face challenges gathering data, especially quantitative, that can be used to measure, analyse, and evaluate the quality of employment for marriage migrants. This illustrates the more general difficulty of researching marginalized groups who fill informal, casual, temporary, and insecure jobs at the bottom of labor markets. Evaluating social policies as they relate to reproduction and care transnationally is another challenge, given the insufficiency of regional migration governance in Asia and the lack of government initiatives to enter into agreements to secure social protection for migrants who are not citizens. More detailed empirical studies are required to provide a robust set of data on intergenerational impacts and to test the long-term social costs of migration under prevailing social, legal, and economic circumstances in Asia. In short, much remains to be done conceptually and empirically if we are to fully understand the migration-development-precarity-social reproduction and care linkages.

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1. Asis, Piper and Raghuram 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Raghuram 2009; Asis, Piper and Raghuram 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, see Piper and Yamanaka 2008; Castles, Ozkul and Arias Cubas 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Standing 2009; Ross 2009; Vosko 2000; Piper, Rosewarne and Withers 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Preface to this Special Issue, Chinsung Chung, Keuntae Kim and Nicola Piper, “Marriage Migration in Southeast and East Asia Revisited through a Migration-Development-Nexus Lens.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Razavi 2012; UNRISD 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Oishi 2005; Palriwala and Uberoi 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Castles, Ozkul and Arias Cubas 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lan 2008; M. Kim 2010; H.-K. Lee 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The two additional papers included in this issue are by Daniele Belanger (“Marriage Migration, Single Men and Social Reproduction in Migrant Communities of Origin in Vietnam”), and Sara Friedman (“Revaluing Marital Immigrants: Educated Professionalism and Precariousness among Chinese Spouses in Taiwan”). Three additional papers will appear in *Critical Asian Studies* 49:1 (March 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Piper and Roces 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. De Haas 2007; Faist 2008; Hujo and Piper 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Raghuram 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dannecker 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Piper 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. An exception is the literature on social remittances which is by tendency more gendered and sophisticated in both conceptual and empirical terms. See Rahel Kunz (2011) or Luin Goldring (2004).Yet this rarely enters into mainstream policy debates on migration and development. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Asis, Piper, and Raghuram 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Piper 1997, 2003; Piper and Roces 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The number of men from South Asia who marry Japanese women, for instance, is rather small in comparison. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Oishi 2005; Yeates 2012; Vosko 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Vosko 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Goldring et al. 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Oishi 2005; Lee and Piper 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For example, see Sassen 2002; Kofman 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Piper 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Silvey 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ADB 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Lindquist 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The demand for migrant women care providers signifies a crisis of care in destination countries; by leaving in fairly large numbers, migrant women leave a care gap behind at home. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Piper 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Chi 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See, for instance, Lee H.-K. 2008; Piper 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Jones and Shen 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Friedman 2015; So 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Spitzer and Piper 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Dauverne and Marsden 2014; Chi 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Arunatilake 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Piper, Rosewarne and Withers 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. In contrast, the phenomenon of “de-skilling” or “brain waste” is well documented and widespread. (e.g. IOM 2013; Man 2004; Creese and Wiebe 2012; Nowicka 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See, for example, Enloe 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Cottle and Keys 2010; Elmer 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Spitzer and Piper 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Piper 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. We use “new” in the sense of marriage migrants moving away from their own families back home. This is hence about family formation. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Folbre 2006; Razavi 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Sayer 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Kofman and Raghuram 2009; Lan 2008; Oishi 2005; Yeates 2009; UNRISD 2006; UNRISD 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Yeates 2009; Hochschild 2003; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Parrenas 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Piper and Lee 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Kim 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Hochschild 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Constable 2009, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Nicola Yeates 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Pei-Chia Lan 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Lu 2012; Yeoh, Chee and Baey 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. H-K Lee 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Peng 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Peng 2009; Ochiai 2009; Abe 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Lee and Piper 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Standing 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ross 2009; Vosko 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. C. Kim 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Standing 2011; Vosko 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Rosewarne 2014; Vosko 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Standing 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Vosko 2000; Vosko, Macdonald and Campbell 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See Hyun Mee Kim, forthcoming in *Critical Asian Studies* 49:1, March 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Vosko 2010, 4-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Vosko 2010, 9-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Wills, et al. 2010; Ellis, Wright and Parks 2007; Dyer, McDowell and Batnitzky 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Lan 2008; H.K. Lee 2008; Suzuki 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. H.-K. Lee 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Jones 2012; Jones and Shen 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Sun 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Kofman and Raghuram 2009; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Constable 2009; Sassen 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Levitt and Sorenson 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Belanger and Wang 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Locke, Nguyen and Nguyen 2012; Dong and An 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Suh and Kwon 2014; Kwon 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Suh and Kwon 2014; Peng 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. The pressure they are under should be explored from a mental health point of view in light of the social and psychological costs of mobility being understudied. See for example Pécoud 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)